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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000228

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2015

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL CONFERENCE FAILS TO PRODUCE NEW  
IDEAS AND WIDENS RIFTS

REF: A. MANAMA 174

[B](#). MANAMA 111

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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[1](#). (C) The February 10 constitutional conference organized by four opposition political societies was marked by disagreements among participants and commentary that the opposition excluded key players from the event. NGO activists, political societies, journalists, members of parliament, and even oppositionists were overwhelmingly in agreement that the conference failed to generate fresh strategies for dealing with the government on constitutional amendments. As a result of the conference, many from the government, parliament, and civil society have publicly called for national unity and a more cooperative approach to problem-solving. The widespread negative reaction to the conference could lead Bahrain's opposition to rethink its position to operate outside of the political system and lead to a decision that participation might be a better way to reach its objectives. End Summary.

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Limited Future Plans for Quartet Alliance  
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[2](#). (U) On February 10, four opposition societies, known as the Quartet Alliance, held a conference to discuss constitutional reform in Bahrain (Ref A). The Alliance, composed of Al Wifaq, Al Amal Al Islami, National Democratic Action Society, and Al Tajamo' Al Qowmi, boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections and have vowed to boycott the 2006 elections unless they are granted a dialogue with the King or his representative on amending the constitution. The King has refused to meet with the group following the breakdown of a constitutional dialogue between the Alliance and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, saying amending the constitution should be discussed only through established institutions like the parliament.

[3](#). (U) Throughout the conference, participants focused on their message that the 2002 constitution was not ratified by the people and is therefore illegal. They agreed to organize a future conference on the issue and elected a General Secretariat to coordinate activities. Eleven people joined

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the General Secretariat, two from each of the Alliance's societies and three independent members. Conference participants made plans to lobby within Bahrain and internationally to enact constitutional reform. According to press reports, a comprehensive document on the issue will be presented to the U.S. Congress, the European Union, and "other international bodies interested in democracy and human rights."

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Participant Infighting  
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[4](#). (C) Despite the election of a General Secretariat and plans for future activities, the overwhelming opinion -- from NGO activists, political societies, journalists, members of parliament, and even boycotting groups -- was that the conference failed to generate fresh strategies for progress. According to a leading newspaper, Al Wifaq rejected a proposal made by the National Democratic Action Society (NDAS) to give the Secretariat the authority to conduct negotiations with the government on behalf of the Alliance. This led the head of the conference's Preparatory Committee, Aziz Abul, to accuse Al Wifaq of unjustly taking independent decisions. (Note: The press reported that several conference participants suggested that Al Wifaq's rejection was an attempt to ensure that the opposition's decisions remain in the hands of religious leaders. End Note.) NDAS leader Abdulrahman Al Nuaimi publicly predicted that the Alliance would break apart. Abul later told PolFSN that the Alliance would "definitely remain together." General Secretariat member Nizar Al Qari privately admitted to PolFSN that the conference was not productive.

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Restrictions on Attendance  
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15. (C) The Preparatory Committee cooperated with the Ministry of Social Affairs in limiting the conference's participation to Bahrainis. The Alliance sent letters to foreigners who had been invited to the conference and informed them they could come only as observers. The Committee complied with last minute instructions from the government to bar foreigners from the conference even as observers. (Note: An Amcit invited to attend chose not to do so upon learning of the government's sensitivity. End Note.)

16. (C) A number of political societies and NGOs that support a constitutional dialogue, including the Bahrain Freedoms Society and the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, claimed that conference organizers barred them from attending. Al Mithaq National Action Charter Society denounced the Preparatory Committee's exclusion of certain groups and accused the Quartet Alliance of "destructive competitiveness." Abdul Hadi Marhoon, Council of Representatives (COR) First Deputy Chairman and Democratic Bloc member, told PolFSN that the Alliance's exclusion of others, most importantly those with the authority to make changes, would harm its cause. Fareed Ghazi of the COR's Economic Bloc accused Alliance members of only talking to each other and failing to incorporate new ideas and strategies to promote their goals.

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Calls for National Unity and Cooperation  
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17. (U) On February 9, one day before the conference, English and Arabic newspapers printed a lengthy statement by the King to commemorate the 2001 referendum on the National Action Charter (NAC). (Note: The anniversary of the referendum is February 14, but the King clearly intended his message to reach Bahrainis before the conference. End Note.). The King reaffirmed that when citizens voted on the NAC, they delegated the leadership to draft the constitution. The King encouraged citizens to look to the future and not to the past in thinking about reform. Also on February 9, First Deputy Chairman of the Shura Council Abdul Rahman Jamsheer called on the boycotting societies to engage with the Shura and COR and not be a roadblock. He proposed that professional syndicates might play a role in electing a percentage of seats in the Shura Council, all of whose members are now appointed by the King. Following the conference, several influential groups, including the Al Minbar and Al Mithaq political societies, called the conference ineffective and seconded the King's call for national unity.

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Comment  
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18. (C) The widespread negative reaction to the conference could lead Bahrain's opposition to rethink its position to operate outside of the political system and conclude that participation might be a better way to reach its objectives (Ref B). Both publicly and privately oppositionists are acknowledging that in boycotting and confronting the government they successfully brought important problems into the limelight, but that to solve the problems they believe they can be more effective by working through formal political institutions, including the government and parliament.  
MONROE